SRI AUROBINDO, THE TANTRA AND KUNDALINI

Vasant V. Merchant

Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) was one of India's—indeed, the world's—foremost mystic seers, philosophers, and poets. Although he came from a background of teaching and political action, he underwent a transformative experience in 1910 that led him to a lifelong calling of service to the world through spiritual endeavor. This included a colossal production of texts—including his masterpiece, *The Life Divine*—and the establishment of an ashram in Pondicherry, India. In 1968, the international City of Dawn called Auroville, which he had envisioned, was established a few miles from the ashram.

Helping him as his spiritual collaborator was Mira Alfassa Richard (1878–1973), born in France, called "The Mother." In Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, "The Mother" refers to the Divine Eternal Forces. In the ashram, "The Mother" is representative of that Supreme Power (Mahashakti), a concrete manifestation in human form of the unfolding energy of consciousness in the universe.

The formation of Sri Aurobindo's vision and the expression of it on the earthly plane in the system called integral yoga is an inspiring story. Too long to recount here, it is nevertheless worthy of investigation and research. Suffice it to say that tantra is of major significance to it. Sri Aurobindo once stated that the tantric system "is in its aspiration one of the greatest attempts yet made to embrace the whole of God manifested and unmanifested in the adoration, self-discipline, and knowl-

edge of a single human soul." He described it elsewhere as "a wide, assured, and many-sided endeavor, unparalleled in its power, insight, amplitude, to provide the race with a basis of generalized psychoreligious experience from which man could rise through knowledge, works of love, or through any other fundamental power of his nature to some established supreme experience and highest absolute status."[1]

Underlying integral yoga is the knowledge of the tantra. Yet integral yoga is nevertheless a genuinely new and unique approach to human transformation. Some of the main principles of tantra enter into integral yoga. The ascent of consciousness, for example, through psychophysical centers (chakras) and other aspects of tantric knowledge are part of Sri Aurobindo's formulation. But for the first time in the history of evolutionary consciousness, he articulated and exemplified the *descent* of consciousness, along with the truth that nothing can be done except through the force of The Mother, the creative as well as the redemptive and executive energy of the universe.

In the integral approach of Sri Aurobindo, there is a full appreciation of the many-sided perspective of tantra on the problems of living. Neither tantra nor integral yoga make a false or radical cleavage between a person's inner and outer life, between the so-called higher and lower. Rather, they embrace the human being in his totality and oneness, and aim to give importance to the whole person in all aspects of life, ennobling and uplifting him to the joy of creation, to the delight of becoming divinized, along with the rest of humanity and the physical world. The destiny of the body is to grow into a divine body, its purpose is to pour out and breathe forth the delight of being and becoming. Thus the body becomes the spirit. Therefore it is not to be neglected, abhorred, or condemned, but understood and transmuted for the higher purpose of consciousness consonant with the integral harmony and balance necessary not only with the physical levels but also with the vital, mental, psychic, and spiritual dimensions and aspects of the being and nature.

Kundalini yoga is one of the most important of the shakta tantras, and it is included in Sri Aurobindo's vision of divinized life, though in a way that is distinctly different from modern forms of kundalini yoga. In Sri Aurobindo's teaching, both the individual and cosmic lives' evolutionary thrusts tend toward divinity. Ultimately, therefore, the goals of the individual and of the collective life of humanity are not at variance, but are both seeking the Supracosmic Transcendent Divinity through the process of the ascent and the descent of consciousness, where the chakras are instrumentalities for both the evolution and involution of consciousness flowing through the energy of prana and the proper awakening of kundalini, as represented in the creative mysteries of the spirit in science, metaphysics, psychology, art, ritual, and life.

In the philosophy of the tantra—especially the shakta tantra—the universe is a manifestation of the two poises or stances of the Supreme Consciousness (Divine Shakti) whose nature is Power. The poise of rest (static aspect) supports the poise of action (dynamic aspect). The interaction of these two poles of Her Being brings out of Herself ananda or pure bliss, the delight of her universal expression, and this becomes the sustaining force of the entire creation. This truth of the macrocosm is reflected and repeated in the microcosm of each individual and entity in the universe at different levels. In the human, too, this divine energy or shakti is operative in keeping one alive and functional in different spheres of life. This power or energy is called the kundalini.

Kundalini shakti is defined in the traditional tantric philosophy as the power that is lying unused in the human body. Tantra aims to tap this reservoir, set in motion by the latent energy, and give full meaning to the individual concentration of power that is man. Kundalini shakti is also described as the thrice-coiled serpent power. It is the treasure house of the life essence, the life force stored at the base of the spine. It is also considered the seat of birth, death, and rebirth.

be complete unless it is a supramentalization of the being. Psychicization is not enough, it is only a beginning; spiritualization and the descent of the higher consciousness is not enough, it is only a middle term; the ultimate achievement needs the action of the Supramental Consciousness and Force."[4]

Another major point of difference in Sri Aurobindo's yoga is that even at its highest, it is to be remembered that the kundalini power of the individual—the shakti embedded in the material or body-consciousness—does not rise beyond the domain of the lower triple creation of the physical, vital, and psychic planes of existence. The divine shakti invoked in the yoga of Sri Aurobindo is the Supreme Power that not only extends itself universally, but also transcends the creation, *para shakti*. It is this *mahashakti* (Supreme Power of the Divine Mother) that is instrumental in becoming the most effective means, and not man's puny will and sense of being the doer in awakening the kundalini, which is described as a "devi" or a goddess. Here, too, not mere personal effort and reliance alone on one's own power is the crux; a total surrender is absolutely essential.

This does not mean that individual effort does not count or assume importance in the earlier or initial stages. Also, aids like mantra, japa, asanas, devotional rituals, etc., are used *only* if necessary and only as long as necessary. But they are not considered indispensable as supports, as in other yogas. The only demands in this yoga on the sadhaka are primarily three: aspiration, rejection, and surrender—aspiration for the highest Light and all its manifestations; rejection of all the wrong movements (at whatever level) of any nature that are an impediment on the way; and surrender of all and everything one is to The Mother or the Divine Power invoked. (A word of caution, however, about the meaning of surrender: This unreserved surrender is not a dull, lifeless surrender. It is the unconditional surrender of a vibrant, living, conscious individual that is *integral*—not the surrender of a robot, an automaton, or a mechanical, unconscious being.)

One other point of distinction in the uniqueness of Sri

Aurobindo's yoga is the concept of the Supermind. It is, in fact, the center, the source, and the crown of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, and manifests itself in all the centers—physical, vital, psychic, and mental. What is the Supermind? How can it be reached, experienced, and retained? To that supreme aim Sri Aurobindo addresses himself thus:

> The Supermind is the vast Truth-Consciousness of which the ancient seers spoke; there have been glimpses of it till now, sometimes an indirect influence or pressure, but it has not been brought down into the consciousness of the earth and fixed there. To so bring it down is the aim of our yoga.
>
> . . . It is not by reasoning but by constant experience, growth of consciousness, and widening into the Light that one can reach those higher levels of consciousness above the intellect from which one can begin to look up to the Divine Gnosis. Those levels are not yet the Supermind, but they can receive something of its knowledge.[5]

In traditional literature, there is no mention of such a center, not even an allusion. This can be explained simply by saying that knowledge of the Supermind is *new* knowledge. No one other than Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, who dedicated their entire lives to their stupendous work on the Supermind, its discovery and manifestation, and the transformation of Earth life through the power of Supramental Truth, have ever been known to have received the living splendor and puissance of the Supermind.

A new light on the philosophical and evolutionary history of consciousness, and its basis, function, and purpose in the cosmic schema, is given in Sri Aurobindo's answer to the question: Did the Vedic rishis ever attain the Supermind?

> The Vedic rishis never attained to the Supermind for the earth or perhaps did not even make the attempt. They tried to rise individually to the supramental plane, but they did not bring it down and make it a permanent part of the earth-consciousness. Even there are verses of

> the Upanishads in which it is hinted that it is impossible to pass through the gates of the Sun (the symbol of the Supermind) and yet retain an earthly body. It was because of this failure that the spiritual effort of India culminated in Mayavada. Our yoga is a double movement of ascent and descent; one rises to higher and higher levels of consciousness, but at the same time one brings down their power not only into mind and life, but in the end even into the body. And the highest of these levels, the one at which it aims, is the Supermind. Only when that can be brought down is a divine transformation possible in the earth-consciousness.[6]

The most important distinction between Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga and other lines of yoga lies in the fact that the lotuses or chakras are set in full activity and the centers opened by Consciousness-Energy that was latent (kundalini shakti) and is now awakened and freed into an expanding and ascending movement. This is not accomplished or pursued by mechanical or similar processes, but rather by an integral spontaneous opening and activating of the centers of consciousness occurring naturally and as a direct result of the Divine Consciousness working in life through will, emotion, action, etc.

Hence, the "left hand" (vama marga) practices of the tantra, akin to the lower aspects of spiritualism and spiritism of the Western kind—revolving around hypnotism, mesmerism, black magic, witchcraft, as well as the uses and abuses of sex and drugs for mind expansion—are *not* to be mistaken for, nor equated with, spirituality or truth of the spirit either in the true emphasis of the tantra, kundalini yoga, or Sri Aurobindo's integral approach.

The paradox of the effortless effort in blossoming of the lotuses in the consciousness is likened by Sri Aurobindo thus to:

> Our hidden centres of celestial force
> Open like flowers to a heavenly atmosphere.
>
> *Savitri,* Book II, Canto 12[7]

In its deep lotus home her being sat
As if on concentration's marble seat
Calling the mighty Mother of the worlds,
To make this earthly tenement her house. . . .

Savitri, Book VII, Canto 5

The Divine Mother responds and an emanation comes down and a reciprocal gigantic movement takes place:

A face, a form came down in her heart. . . .
A mighty movement rocked the inner space—
As if a world were shaken and found its soul. . . .

Savitri, Book VII, Canto 5

It is then that the thrice-coiled kundalini wakes up from its slumber, raises its hood, and stands ready for the tremendous ascent, and the lotus centers are awakened and fragranced by the touch and power of the smiling shakti all through the way in this ascent and evolution of consciousness:

A flaming serpent rose released from sleep.
It rose billowing its coils and stood erect
And climbing mightily stormily on its way
It touched her centers with its flaming mouth:
As if a fiery kiss had broken their sleep,
They bloomed and laughed and surcharged
with light and bliss. . . .

And the mystic serpent

Then at the crown it joined the Eternal's space.

Savitri, Book VII, Canto 5

The supreme power of the Supramental Truth is not confined to any one center, not even to Supermind. But on the experience and the authority of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, we now know that the center that receives the Supramental Consciousness is *above the head, above the thousand-petaled lotus.* And the power of this Supramental Consciousness extends, sweeps, permeates, pervades, and pene-

trates, infuses and suffuses all life and consciousness in all the centers, known and unknown.

Integral yoga therefore differs from other traditional yogas, including tantric yoga, not only in its essence and processes, but also in its purpose and method (although it does have a foundation in it). Its outstanding feature is represented by the newness and fullness of its aim, scope, and distinctive standpoint, and by the uniqueness of the totality of its method. Its comprehensiveness underscores its importance for the psychology of the human race. Its consequence and implications for the individual and collective life of man point directly to the perfection of mankind and the divinization of earth life.

In summary, Sri Aurobindo sets before us an aim and a goal—a spectrum and a panorama of achievement still to be accomplished, still to be achieved as a result of the preparation of Nature by all the past spiritual endeavors, though his own light belongs not "to the dawns of the past, but the noons of the future." The main points of difference new in Sri Aurobindo's yoga as compared with the old yogas can be best expressed in Sri Aurobindo's own words:

> 1. Because it aims not at a departure out of world and life into Heaven or Nirvana, but at a change of life and existence, not as something subordinate or incidental, but as a distinct and central object. If there is a descent in other yogas, yet it is only an incident on the way or resulting from the ascent—the ascent is the real thing. Here the ascent is the first step, but it is a means for the descent. It is the descent of the new consciousness attained by the ascent that is the stamp and seal of the sadhana. Even the tantra and Vaishnavism end in the release from life; here the object is the divine fulfillment of life.
>
> 2. Because the object sought after is not an individual achievement of divine realization for the sake of the individual, but something to be gained for the earth-consciousness here, a cosmic, not solely a supracosmic achievement. The thing to be gained also is the bringing

in of a Power of Consciousness (the supramental) not yet organized or active directly in earth-nature, even in the spiritual life, but yet to be organized and made directly active.

3. Because a method has been precognized for achieving this purpose which is as total and integral as the aim set before it, viz., the total and integral change of the consciousness and nature, taking up old methods but only as a part action and present aid to others that are distinctive. I have not found this method (as a whole) or anything like it professed or realized in the old yogas. . . .

. . . Our yoga is not a retreading of old walks, but a spiritual adventure.[8]

NOTES

1. *On the Tantra,* ed. M. P. Pandit (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970).
2. *Letters on Yoga,* Sri Aurobindo (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972), Part I, Vol. 22, p. 73.
3. Ibid., p. 74.
4. Op. cit., p. 99.
5. Op. cit., p. 101.
6. Op. cit., p. 102.
7. All references to *Savitri* are from Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* (with Letters) (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1954).
8. Op. cit., pp. 100–1.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

Aurobindo, Sri. *Centenary Library,* Vol. 22. Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972.

——. *Savitri* (with Letters). Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1954.

——. *On the Tantra,* ed. M. P. Pandit. Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970.

——. *Essays on the Gita.* Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1976.